Premier slammed over climate plans; PCs accused of gutting global warming programs with no replacements

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Body

The new Doug Ford government has "gutted" Ontario's climate change programs without providing replacements as the problems of global warming become more urgent, environmental commissioner Dianne Saxe says in a damning new report.

"We had a climate law and programs that were working. Now we don't," Saxe said Tuesday. "When pollution is free, we can expect to have more of it."

Among other things, Saxe took the Progressive Conservatives to task for promising a 10-cent cut per litre in the price of gasoline that will "make it cheaper to put climate pollution into the air."

The commissioner's 242-page report slams Ford for axing the previous Liberal government's cap-and-trade program to limit greenhouse gas emissions, which the new premier branded a "carbon tax" that was doing nothing to protect the atmosphere.

Environment Minister Rod Phillips stood firm on the government's course after its election with a solid 76-seat majority on June 7, and pledged a climate change plan will be revealed later this year.

"We made a commitment, and we're not going to apologize for it, to get rid of the carbon tax and get rid of cap and trade," Phillips said.

"As I told the commissioner directly, we absolutely respect her role ... (but) she has the luxury of advocating for higher taxes," he added.

"Respectfully, we do not take well to folks telling us that we should not live up to the promises that we made. And our promise is that we're going to save Ontarians $260 a year."

Opposition parties shared concerns voiced in the commissioner's report.

"It was damning and rightly so. This is a government that has not been serious about climate action," said New Democrat MPP Peter Tabuns (Toronto-Danforth).

"They should have continued the existing climate plan until they had a substitute."

Green party Leader Mike Schreiner said the government is "missing in action" on a crucial file, and has sent strong signals to the business community that it is "walking away" from the fast-growing clean economy.

Energy Minister Greg Rickford defended the government's summer decision to axe almost 800 green energy projects, saying that they were "wasteful" because the electricity they would generate is not needed.

But Saxe warned that with Ontario's population expected to grow by as many as five million people in the next 25 years, backing away from renewable energy now could result in the need for more fossil-fuelled energy later.

Greenpeace spokesperson Keith Stewart said he fears Ontario will lose out on the growing renewable energy wave with a "backwards approach" from the new government.

"At this rate, we're not going to be building the electric vehicles that are going to take over the way digital cameras replaced film cameras," Stewart said. "That's the world we're moving towards."

Saxe said the cap-and-trade money was funding energy-efficiency programs in schools, public housing, hospitals and transit systems. She singled out a hospital in Elliott Lake that is saving $300,000 a year on energy bills by replacing its heating system.

Phillips challenged her assertion.

The cap-and-trade program set a declining cap on greenhouse gas emissions, and allowed companies in select industries to sell credits if their emissions fell below prescribed limits.

Saxe said the government's Bill 4, the Cap and Trade Cancellation Act, is "much too weak" in the way it outlines requirements for a new climate change plan, and urged Ontarians to express concerns about it on the province's Environmental Registry before an Oct. 11 deadline.

Greenpeace said the government must be prodded by citizens to take firm action.

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